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## Mediating and mass communicating Sept 11

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## COMMENTARY

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# Mediating And Mass Communicating Sept 11

*This commentary is the result of a research survey conducted with 70 Mass Communication undergraduate students enrolled in a unit simply entitled Mass Communication II at Murdoch University on September 11, 2002 (911). The survey was intended, firstly, to commemorate a possibly over-hyped first anniversary of the Sept.11 attack on New York. Secondly, it aims to find out if students would employ the critical tools of media analyses in thinking about a media event like 911. Students were asked to revisit their reactions following the collapse of the Twin Towers, to consider if the coverage was 'media overkill' and to express their thoughts one year on. This commentary looks into how resistance to global media is manifested in expressions of disinterest and resentment of global media. It offers media educators a way of thinking about the discursive ways in which students utilise and apply theoretical knowledge.*

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**M**ass Communication II is a required unit for students enrolled in a Mass Communication (Public Relations and Journalism) degree at Murdoch University, Western Australia. In the unit, typically undertaken in the final year of study, students explore the complex terrain of globalisation, new media technologies, as well as international media and info-communications. Focusing on matters such as the power of global media corporations, the management of new media technologies, and on the relationships between technology and society (i.e. individual citizens, businesses, transnational corporations, governments, etc.), the unit draws on and interrogates a broad range of theoretical approaches from more 'political economy' works to texts with a greater social and cultural emphasis. As instructors of the unit, we believe that such topics are highly relevant. After all, in an increasingly mediated world, many students are audiences of Hollywood, Bollywood and Hong Kong movies and television serials. Even

before commencing their Mass Communication studies, many of our students are deeply familiar with CNN and BBC news channels. The more 'internationalised' students are ardent Internet surfers, mobile phone users and are regular receivers of regional news from television news services such as *CNBC Asia* and *Channel NewsAsia* (from Singapore). Indeed, most Mass Communication students are already mass audiences and mass communicators.

The significance of our Mass Communication II unit at Murdoch University is the focus on the fact that all of these seemingly unproblematic media outlets are sites of intense debates and political struggles. For instance, issues of globalisation have led to fighting in the streets in cities around the world, as we saw most graphically in 'the battle of Seattle' (2000) and, closer to home, the protests at the 2000 Melbourne World Economic Forum (see Craig, 2002). Does globalisation represent the final victory of the forces of capitalism? Should we open up markets to the free flow of information and goods or should we establish regulatory and security mechanisms? Does the wave of global media content mean that we are losing local and national identities and becoming Americanised or Westernised à la cultural and media imperialism? These are some of the pertinent questions we pose to our students throughout the teaching semester. However, we remained acutely aware that apart from the standard academic essays submitted by our students, there were very few available avenues to gauge the discursive thoughts of our students to the cultural, political and economic forms of global communication issues explored in the unit.

The terror attacks on American soil on September 11, 2001 (hereafter referred to as 911) not only destroyed physical structures – with the World Trade Centre Twin Towers the most prominent – but caused our understanding of globalisation to take a new turn. Within this new paradigm, global media was the first to stand out. Apropos, it would not be an exaggeration to say that every television network around the world attempted to provide their local audiences a first-hand 'live' account of the tragic events of 911. Whether this footage came from CNN or *Fox News* (both American TV networks) was irrelevant in the immediate aftermath. All television audiences would recall viewing footage of the dramatic collapse repeatedly in the days and weeks following 911, so much so that many have philosophised about the dreamlike cinematic effect of television images showing the collapse of the Twin Towers (Osborne, 2003: 5). The vivid and disturbing images of out-of-control hijacked planes slamming into the Twin Towers, of people jumping or falling from buildings and the eventual collapse of the towers even became a health hazard, with doctors warning the public against over-consumption of those images (*The*

*Straits Times*, Aug 31, 2002). Media coverage of the event was expectedly highly charged and had a strong impact of the world. As Savio opines, “not two, but thousands of towers fell over and over again on every network” (Savio, 2002: 17).

As the first anniversary of the terror attacks drew close in September 2002, we decided as instructors of Mass Communication II, that an opportunity was available for us to ‘test’ the key theories that we had been imparting to our students. In our search for a simple but useful approach to analysing our students, we found Ien Ang’s (1996) comprehensive study on media audiences a useful resource (see also Ang, 1991). We were inspired by Ang’s research with her students at the University of Amsterdam about their experiences with CNN’s media coverage of the 1991 Gulf War two weeks after its launch. According to Ang, her students reacted in a consistent manner. They began with “an obsessive fascination” with minute-to-minute real-time reports and images on CNN, motivated by a desire to stay involved (Ang, 1996: 151). Within a week, however, this feeling of participation became superseded by a desire for detachment, indifference and resentment about the excessiveness and over-emphasis on war.

As Ang summarises, “The initial interest gave way to a more routine form of (dis)engagement. In other words, what gradually but inevitably occurred was a kind of ‘resistance’ against the imposed complicity created by the news media, a quiet revolt against the position of well-informed powerless induced by the media’s insistence on keeping us continuously posted. [...] For most of them, the war remained a limited media reality which did not succeed in totally encroaching on the intimate texture of their local, everyday concerns” (Ang, 1996: 151).

Following Ang, we decided to conduct a mini-survey research on our students at the start of lecture on September 11, 2002. Students were posed three questions:

1. Flashback to September 11 or 12, 2001. What was your first reaction to September 11, 2001 upon your first TV viewing of the Twin Towers collapse?
2. Did you think that the subsequent media reports were ‘media overkill’?
3. What are your thoughts today as the world commemorates 1 year since September 11? Have they changed?

These questions were intended to capture immediacy, so that students would provide a genuine ‘first-thought’ response. In the sections that follow, we provide a summary of the responses to the three questions. We offer our critical comments on how Mass Communication students would respond to a major event or crisis that demands both

engagement and complicity versus disengagement and criticality simultaneously. This paper provides an interesting look into how resistance becomes manifest in expressions of disinterest and resentment of global media. It offers all mass communication or media educators insight into the way students utilise and articulate theoretical knowledge.

## Initial Mediated Reaction to 911

The first question was essentially a question of recollection. Indeed, it is common knowledge that the coverage of the terror attacks ran uninterrupted for approximately twenty-four hours on all free-to-air television channels in Australia (see Jackson, 2002). The repetition of footage, photographs in the newspapers, and the same interviews being played over and over on the broadcast media, produced a sustained and weighted environment of critical information, simultaneously reacting to and reinforcing the audience's need to know (Savio, 2002). By asking students to "flashback to September 11 or 12, 2001" (since it was already September 12<sup>th</sup> when news of the attacks were made public in Australia), we were trying to evoke emotional responses and to emphasise that feelings of tragedy were very much linked to their "first TV viewing of the Twin Towers collapse". Likewise, Ang's (1996) research found that her students felt "a haunting sense of involvement" as they watched the first days of the Gulf War coverage by CNN in 1991 (Ang, 1996: 151). This statement readily characterises the initial reactions described by our students. Most mentioned shock and disbelief, with others extending their answers to include feelings of surrealism or unreality. Common reactions were as follows:

- This can't be real.
- America is under attack? What? This can't be.
- Shock, disbelief, a rather strange notion of unreality.
- Speechless, shocked.
- Shock. Denial. Could not believe that it is real. Thought that it was a hoax.
- Shock - then I thought this was the beginning of WW III.
- I was in a state of shock, almost in tears, thinking about all these people who actually were losing their lives.
- I could not believe the picture of the twin towers crashing. I was shocked by the pictures.

The ways in which audiences are quickly caught up by the event reiterates Ang's reference to an "imposed complicity created by the news media", a positioning of the audience by the media as participants in global events via a discourse that

## Media Overkill?

reinforces, as well as responds to, their desire to remain informed (Ang, 1996: 151). Reactions of shock, disbelief, fear and rhetorical 'speechlessness' are the reactions of heavily involved subjects. The empathy students feel and the expression of highly subjective fears – such as the student who fears the advent of World War III – demonstrate a sense of the self as partaking in the event, being affected directly and personally despite being aware of the mediated nature of the event. In their responses, students inadvertently reiterate the complicity and involvement assumed by the news media. They emphasise their connectivity to people in other parts of the world, realising, unproblematically, the pinnacle of globalisation as a "dense web of cross-border relationships" (A. T. Kearney Inc, 2002: 40).

The *Macquarie Concise Dictionary* defines the term 'overkill' as "the use of more resources or energy than is necessary to achieve one's aim" (1998: 820). By asking students if they thought that "subsequent media reports were 'media overkill', we were really nudging students to think critically about issues pertaining to media bias, propaganda and aspects of media's imperialising powers. While there are those who see the media as playing a traditionally important role in informing the public of events and information that matters, many respondents agreed that the coverage was excessive. In the framing of the question, there was an expectation of unanimous support for the affirmative, that is, the media has overplayed the event. By the same token, we were taken by surprise by students who did not find the media coverage 'overkill', or who excused the abundance of coverage as part of the media's business (see Croteau and Hoynes, 2001):

- Not at all. There was a huge demand for information pertaining to the events in New York and Washington which were met by the supply from the news agencies.
- No. People around the globe should know about this incident.
- Some of the images were very sad yet it helped to put a thought in everyone's mind about what is going on.
- Coming from CNN, which is American, the emphasis is understandable.
- The reports during the initial incident were important.
- It was kind of imperative to show the images.

However, many of the students who recognised the obligation of the media to show journalistic 'news' (in its raw form) still felt that the amount of news time devoted to the incident was

excessive. This could be attributed to the directive nature of our question, intended on the one hand to draw the obvious answers, but also to invoke criticality amongst our students on the other. Nevertheless, as expected, the following comments came from students who felt the media coverage to be 'overkill':

- People die all over the world for various reasons. Natural disasters, terrorism, cruel dictatorships, civil and other wars, starvation or drought. Why the big fuss over the US?
- Media ruined the event and made such a big deal about it all. There was WAY too much coverage (emphasis in original).
- By showing the event all over, what good does that do to us, except for media profit[?]
- They were cashing in on the misery, making it harder for affected people.
- They didn't report anything new. Seemed to glorify or make it more 'tabloid-y', made it cheap, pointless hype.
- The reporters [were] repeating themselves all the time. No one had any fresh insight into the matter.
- They didn't report anything new.
- The public wanted information and the thing was, the same news kept on repeating.
- The repeated videos were a little overdone.
- Too much repetition of the crash footage.
- [The] repetition of horror images has desensitised my feelings toward 911.

Interestingly, instead of a yes/no comment, a debate about the role of the media ensued. While this should be expected of students in a Mass Communication II class, it is fascinating to see how students seized the (almost accidental) opportunity to re-examine and re-imagine themselves as viewers giving consensus to the media. Whether the media portrays an unadulterated 'truth' remains, willy-nilly, a highly discursive matter. Yet there are students who feel that the role of the media is to inform, to keep the public notified. These students saw the extent of the coverage as 'necessary' to maintaining a degree of objectivity, a kind of "it's not pretty but it needs to be told" attitude towards the story. Students who felt the media coverage was 'overkill' made references to the lack of 'change' in events despite the continuous coverage. As Jackson puts it, while many viewers kept watching their screens, "a dearth of fresh vision soon put what footage there was into a grisly loop: planes smashing, bodies falling, towers toppling, round and round, from various angles", hence the feeling of media 'overkill' (Jackson, 2002: 4).

It appears there were students who experienced feelings of futility as the media attempts to presume a consensual complicity on the part of television audiences. Indeed, these students would become increasingly aware of their “well-informed powerlessness” as their abilities to effect change in whatever measure were inversely proportional to the degree of involvement they felt (Ang, 1996: 151). Repeated witnessing of the two planes flying into the Twin Towers in New York – especially the global ‘live’ broadcast of second plane spearing into the south tower – serves to invite the audience back to that initial moment of consensual complicity when the sense of involvement of the audience was at its height. The mediated omnipresence of these images, no doubt, still elicits a sense of involvement and strong attachment in most of us. However, as it becomes clear that this implicated involvement results in a complete lack of change, we begin to question the point of this reiterated complicity. Such questionings are indeed part and parcel of the discursive politics of television viewing.

After all, as Ang suggests: We can switch off the television set, but as its images pervade the texture of our everyday worlds, the distinction between media reality and social reality becomes blurred. What needs to be addressed, then, is the complicated relationship between global media and local meanings, their intricate interconnections as well as disjunctions (1996: 152).

With these thoughts in mind, it is also possible to understand why our students have unwittingly posed questions on the role of the media in a situation like 911. Instead of stating their perceptions of the media coverage of 911, most students adopted a somewhat philosophical stance, pondering on what a responsible media should have done.

## Re-commemorating 911

The responses to the final question elicited reactions that were more condemning and reactionary than the previous two questions. In the responses to this question on thoughts of the event one year later, we see anger, disillusionment and aggravation, especially with regard to the political, economic, cultural and media domination of the world by America. Many of the statements were reactionary and at times incendiary:

- America is using this tragedy to serve their own political and economic purpose.
- It’s sad. But Americans always make a big deal of things. They deserved what happened, in a way.
- At first it was a terrible thing but now it seems as if the US



is using this as a way to boost their image in the world as the 'good guys'

- [I] think the point of the terrorist attacks has been missed. [They] served only to rejuvenate American patriotism on this the newly named 'patriot day'.
- I'm sick of it. America hasn't changed and it's still too full of itself.
- I will not be drawn into pro-American overkill.
- The US is still as proud as ever.

The United States, or simply 'America', is seen as the mastermind of this 'imposed complicity' which the students have come to resent. There are two noteworthy points here. Firstly, the focus of the resentment is on "America" and not the local television stations which chose to air the material constantly. In fact, the machinations of the local media and any editorial decisions that may be made at this level are ignored. The media is seen as global in format and appearance, thus it becomes 'America'. Secondly, the subject of this resentment and anger is a totalised entity: 'America', 'the US' and/or 'Americans' rather than 'American foreign policy' or 'the American media'. Students couch their antagonism in rhetoric that deprives the geopolitical state of the USA and its people of heterogeneity, buying into a novel wave of anti-Americanism that surfaced from early-2002 and continues in 2003 (McDonald, 2003: 8-9). The response to the obviation of local identity imposed by a globalised media is to deprive the message (and the message makers) of complexity.

Students in our Mass Communication unit are given in-depth instructions on the global economy of media ownership. They are therefore aware of the vast amount of media production that is owned, controlled or happening in the USA. It follows that they are trained to read into the key issues of a 'watershed' media event that takes place on American soil. They question its salience to the 'local' in the context of 'media-overkill', suggesting that the extent of media coverage is unnecessary: since "the media are American" and privilege American stories (Tunstall, 1977), the coverage on Australian television is always-already excessive, irrelevant and, ergo, evidence of the dominance of the American media as a cultural product. Its power is absolute and its impact on the 'weaker' Australian media is therefore unassailable. This discursive reality is one where the cultural imperialism thesis applies. The cultural imperialism thesis is studied in our Mass Communication II unit and our students are required to read Tomlinson's explanation of the thesis (Tomlinson, 1991 and 1997). Students see the dominance of the images from America on their

television screens and readily apply the cultural imperialism thesis: the dominance of one culture is to the detriment of another, resulting in the loss of the local and a loss of diversity. However simplistic, the cultural imperialism thesis is attractive as it explains (away) the loss of one's identity, whether real or imagined (Boyd-Barrett, 1998).

## Conclusion

To engage with 911 as a mediated discourse at any level is to seek boundaries and definitions within which to be heard. In other words, students saw our survey on 911 as their opportunity to articulate and apply their newly acquired knowledge of global media and accompanying discourses of globalisation, especially the cultural imperialism thesis. All of these concepts are important theories explored in the unit. In seeking to articulate an essence of their emotive responses to September 11, our students find the 'cultural imperialism' argument convenient, effectively simple, mercifully utilitarian and academically canonised. In the overwhelmingly and blanketing black smog of meaning, these students latch on to the discourse of cultural – and indeed, media – imperialism with the vigour of relief. We suspect this is also true of all media audiences, though its authentication must be studied elsewhere.

One year after the event, these students feel the need to assert their identity as outside the assumed consensus of the media. They assert their resistance to the repetition of the "imposed complicity" that took place one year ago (Ang, 1996: 151), emphasising their defiance of their status as the 'weak' and 'dominated' audience implied in the cultural imperialism discourse. In the final question, they express feelings of detachment with regard to the event and irritation that this assumed consensus pretends to include them:

- I feel less afraid, less hyped-up about the whole incidence. I'm more concerned with my own problems.
- It is sad for those it happened to, their families and friends but really I think the rest of us should just get over it.
- I personally think the entire incident should be put to rest.
- Other people in the world are suffering too.
- I think we should move forward and try to keep this tragedy behind us.
- Why do they bother going into the event again, when it is already so highly broadcast on the day itself? Just because it is the US?

One student even highlighted his/her refusal to participate in the first anniversary commemorative ritual for 911 – driving

with car headlights on during the day – as a protest against global complicity. Such a protest exemplifies Ang's "quiet revolt against the position of well-informed powerlessness" (Ang, 1996: 151).

With reference to the political rhetoric espoused by the US government immediately after 911, Buck-Morss notes that "when hegemony is under siege it does not tolerate a complexity of meaning" (2002; 4). Mass Communication students are often taught to question political rhetoric and to look for complexities and contradictions. Yet it is difficult to counter political rhetoric with an argument of complexity derived from theoretical media texts. While students may recognise complexity in the explosion of meanings that erupted after 911, more often than not, they lack discursive spaces in which to express it. At the same time, we find that our students are in the position of the 'well-informed' when it comes to an event like 911. They are bombarded with discourse – with knowledge, images, theories and definitions – and become embroiled in a complex web of meaning-making and reaction. In an academic environment, they are not only expected to make meaning of the event, but to express meanings made. The result is an attempt to grapple with complexities, and an emphatic adherence to a reductionist discourse – such as globalisation and the media/cultural imperialism theory – that is workable and valid. They react as a disempowered consumer attempting to (re)claim power, seeking to maintain control over their cultural and political environment by resisting the "imposed complicity" of the media and seeking to identify themselves as the unique 'other'.

There is little doubt that the drawing of current examples to teach complex Mass Communication concepts has the tremendous ability to invoke students' involvement and engagement. There is a need to provide students a ready space to practice articulating various positions and inclinations. There is similarly a need to acknowledge the limitations of academia and encourage discourses that stress the academic validity of complex reactions to media events. Mass Communication instructors go a long way to meeting these needs by sparking lively debates across all positions and encouraging students to see their resistances as part of an empowering process, so that students avoid slipping into situations of "well-informed powerlessness" (Ang, 1996: 151).

Just as global media and mass communication itself will continue to re-define itself post-911, the events (and aftermath) of 911 will continue to be examined and debated (see Savio, 2002; and Jackson, 2002). The need to continually engage our students with issues of global media, mass communication and audience research is, for better or worse, never ending. Simply because the mediated events of 911 are still happening (Osborne, 2003: 11). ■

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